

# NÉPRAJZI ÉRTESÍTŐ

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# **NÉPRAJZI ÉRTESÍTŐ**

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TAMÁS MOHAY

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## WORK TIME AND LABOR ON A PEASANT FARM IN HUNGARY

This paper is an attempt to analyse a small private farm which operated between 1924–1925, that is from the post World War I. years until about 1960, the year agriculture was reorganised into collective farms, on the basis of its own records. As this paper is part of a monography my aim this time is limited to identifying the way a peasant farm – let us call its owner Sándor Nagy – provided the necessary labor force, how the peasant owner made use of the labor of the family members and how the system of exchange of labor operated within the village neighbourhood. Such questions can hopefully be answered based on the detailed household-farming records kept by the owner. It is important to be able to identify these issues also because it has been only recently after the study by Tamás Hoffmann has been published (1963) that experts started to deal with the questions (Mária Molnár 1970, 1977, 1982; László Szabó 1982) related to the ways peasant farms used to organise work, what the inner order of such organisations operated, what relationships existed between such operations.

Only the analysis of concrete cases can help us to answer more general questions, such as what can be regarded as peasant holding what is the interrelation between the peasant farm, the family and the household? It remains to be answered whether or not the three concepts have the same limits? It needs to be clarified whether the concept *peasant holding* includes economic units of very different types such as commodity producing capitalist detached farms (Balogh 1980), half -and -half system or only small farming units supplying only the needs of the family. I think that to be able to regard a peasant production unit as a *peasant holding* it is not enough to study the quantities and composition of the marketed products it also needs to be decided whether the farm is managed rationally, based on economic calculations, or is simply guided by traditions, prevailing conditions, identified needs and possibilities. In that latter case it is perhaps better to exclude these ideas from the concept of peasant holding and use the term *peasant farm* instead.

Sándor Nagy was born in 1897 and died in 1987. He lived half his life in the northern part of the region where Hungarian was spoken, in Ipolynyék, a village preserving traditions and in 1947 he moved to Mór (Fejér county, Pannonia) as his village became part of Czechoslovakia under the peace treaty of Trianon, and the oppression of national minorities increased after World War II. Between 1925 and 1947 he succeeded to increase the size of his holding from 6 cadastral acres (1 cadastral acre = 1,42 acres) to 18 by buying and leasing lands. Together with dozens of his fellow peasants in the village working on the poor quality land he was able to supply his family with different commodities and could also produce excess for the market (Mohay 1987a, 1987b, 1989). What made Mr. Nagy different from his fellow peasants was that he kept records on his

incomes and spendings. His economic diary – supplemented by his memoirs – is a most valuable source of information on the daily operations of his farm. That source is further supplemented by additional records in the „family archives” as well as the notes Sándor Nagy junior kept in the farmers’ school between April and September 1944. These notes record the daily work schedule per hours. Similar diaries are found in Hungary and in other European countries in museums and archives, and they are now being studied and processed in several places (e.g. Ambrus Molnár 1967; István Szabó 1981; Krupa 1970; Stoklund 1979/80; Ottenjann 1982; Woodward 1984; Miller 1985, etc.).

It was not an economic diary that Sándor Nagy has kept; he occasionally registered the works which involved expenses; at a later stage he also recorded activities he did not want to be forgotten. Let us first look at the number and types of works done on his own farm and the information we get is telling indeed.

Number and types of operations done for Nagy’s own farm:

Year	Number Types		Year	Number Types		Year	Number Types	
1926	—	—	1932	14	12	1938	8	8
1927	3	3	1933	8	8	1939	5	5
1928	13	10	1934	4	4	1940	3	2
1929	8	6	1935	5	5	1941	11	10
1930	6	5	1936	11	10	1942	5	5
1931	2	2	1937	3	3	1943	7	6
						1944	6	6

It is but obvious that the number of operations recorded is far less than the number of even the most important operations on the farm; but it cannot be accidental that for the years 1928, 1932, 1936 and 1941 far higher figures were recorded. Sándor Nagy used to keep far more carefully his records in the years which were special for one reason or another: in 1932 in addition to farming his own land he also tented lands (partly because of a poor harvest); in 1936 he increased the size of leased lands, and he did the same in 1941 again.

Without going into details on what exactly Sándor Nagy felt needed to be recorded from among the operations done on his own farm, let us survey the picture we get from his and his son’s daily records. Appendix No. 1. shows the main groups of monthly operations done between April 1. and October 1. 1944.

Obviously not all the work done was recorded in the notebook. Sándor Nagy jr. only recorded the operations he personally did alone or together with others. He must have recorded the work done by family members only when he himself cooperated. The feeding of the animals was also not recorded similarly to other daily operations around the house.

The greatest value of the diary is that it also includes the number of hours spent on each operation. Naturally we cannot take the recorded hours on face value, but they can be used for analysis. The diary has separate columns for the name of the operations, their locations, the start and the end of the work phases, the name of the team of horses (oxen), the number of family members, hired labour and farmhands. There is also a column for notes clarifying on whose land the specified work was done.

Appendix No. 2. is a summary of some characteristics of the times spent on work. The *number of monthly work hours* depended on the number of Sundays and holidays during the given month. (Sándor Nagy was Catholic by religion.) The peak months were July and August. One can see how the number of work hours grew from spring towards summer per month and per day. If the number of work hours during April is taken as 100%, in August the number increased to 157%, and dropped to 112% in September. The ratio of the total number of working hours was 213 and 129%, the ratio of work-hours per day was 179 in August and 113 in September. That means that the additional work hours were gained by extending the working day and also by increasing the number of workers per day.

The next lines (lines 7–12. Appendix No. 2.) show who worked and for whom. On Sándor Nagy's farm there were only occasional laborers, who were not always paid in money or in kind but sometimes by reciprocating labor. During six months 4% of the work was done by paid laborers, who always worked side by side with family members. We do not know who exactly those paid laborers were, but most probably they were relatives, neighbors, or perhaps poorer people living in the neighborhood. Most of the paid labor was performed obviously during the peak months of July and August, amounting to 80% of all the work done on the farm by paid laborers. During those two months 31 and 112 hours respectively were done by paid workers, helping in harvesting and collecting grains, while in other months they helped harrowing, planted potatoes, tying up vines, cutting corn stalks. According to the diary paid laborers worked only part time most of the ten days they were employed. Accordingly Sándor Nagy's farm was of the type which did employ outside help only occasionally and only to a limited extent.

On the other hand Sándor Nagy and his family performed more work for others in the form of help or payment than the amount others did for them both in time and in proportions: during the six months 11,2%. Almost 50% of those 509 hours were performed in August. In August 1944 there were full days when only work performed for others were recorded, and that work was done by 2–3 family members a day. 21,6% of all the work hours spent in August, and 24% of all the work spent by family members was work done for others. April was another month when over 20% of the work performed by the family members was done for others.

But for whom did the members of the Nagy family work? According to the records for only a handful of persons: for relatives, such as the widow of Mr. Nagy's brother, for the god-parents of a son, for neighbors, mostly. All that reflects the fact that in 1944 even the youngest of the Nagy sons was already 17 year old and the farm had some excess labour. But that excess was not large enough for us to classify the farm as one which would have needed a significant income earned from performing work for others to survive.

Disregarding excess labour and studying only the amount of work performed for their own farm (line 13, Appendix No. 2.) we can see that most of the working hours were recorded for July, twice the number recorded for April. This difference proves from another aspect what was already mentioned with respect to work days. The changes in time are even more obvious when the monthly work hours performed by the family members are expressed in relation to the monthly average of 675,5 hours. Thus in April (rounded up) the ratio was 60%, in May 96%, in June 104%, in July 128%, in August 126%, in September 86%.

Literature has already published several efforts of assessing the number of work hours spent on the average on cadastral acres in peasant farms (e.g. Oláh 1971). The data published were based on statistical surveys. The analysis of the economic records in an important possibility to approach the question from another aspect. Taking our data as a basis we can conclude that the number of work hours spent on each unit that peasant farm of 18,5 cadastral acre were 211 hours in the period between April and October. Calculating with working days of 12 hours, and taking the above data into account (line 6. Appendix 2.) we can conclude that during the 6 summer months 20,5 work days (of all the work performed) or 17,5 work days (of all the work spent on their own farm) were spent on each cadastral acre. That data can serve as a basis for calculating the annual need for labour. Let us presume that during the 6 winter months half the amount of work required during the summer months needs to be performed altogether 26,9 *work days*, if two thirds, 29 *work days* had to be spent annually for a cadastral acre of land (in Sándor Nagy's farm at Ipolynyék). These data are somewhat lower than the 32,2 days given by contemporary economists calculated for the peasant holdings of the hilly region.

And finally let us take a look on the work done by draught animals; in 1944 such operations contributed the majority of the work done for others. During the earlier years Sándor Nagy's goal had been to obtain draught animals. The first half of this century was in Hungary the period when oxen were replaced by horses as draught animals, however Sándor Nagy used to have only oxen, although his dream was to buy horses also. Travelling by ox-cart was a slow journey, and Mr. Nagy had to ask the favor of horse-owners whenever he wanted to get to a fair or to the market. However the number of draught animals he owned was higher than what the size of his holding needed, and so he was able to perform work which required draught animals for his poorer neighbors. In exchange those neighbors came to help him in hacking, mowing, doing manual labor.

In 1944 the largest number of work days with draught animals were in April and August, and the lowest number in June. That has ment a peak in the number and in the ratio of work hours with draught animals in April (412 hours, 80,6%) and in August (569 hours, 52,3%). The high number of work hours with draught animals per day can be explained by the employment of hired draught animals, with Sándor Nagy driving one pair of oxen, his son another pair.

The third table of Appendix shows the time spent on work with draught animals during the individual months, and the ratio of such works during each month. During the six months only to drive the plough and ingathering the harvest were the operations that had to be performed every month. Most of the work to be done with draught animals was performed in September, and August was the month with the least of such operations. During the six months from spring to autumn the distribution of transportation work was most even. The most concentrated operation was the ingathering of the harvest the major part of wich was performed in August (including work performed for others). A smaller proportion of the transportation of manure and driving the plough had to be performed in the spring to autumn half of the year and this fact created some distortion, although a lot of them had to be performed during the summer months also.

Summing up we can conclude that the peasant farm investigated was of the type which did not need regular outside labor nor did it have labor so much in excess as to have required to work for others to earn a major share of the family revenue from working outside the family holding. Our analytical method was a type of microanalysis made possible by favorable resources: peasant „family archives” and personal comments of



family members made possible by the short time span between the period investigated and the time of the investigation proper. Obviously this analysis is not enough to provide the basis for more general conclusions. It only shows that even a single model includes large variations, changes, the identification of which can help us to get a deeper understanding of peasant holding, peasant work and farm management.

## APPENDICES

## Appendix Nr. 1. Work operations recorded in 1944 monthly and by type of work in the farm on Sándor Nagy

	In April	In May	In June
Around the house	Cutting wood Cleaning the courtyard	Digging air raid shelter, repairing fence and roof, repairing tools, cutting timber repairing shoes	Repairing cart Carving broomstick and handle for the fork
With animals	Chopping chaff	Cleaning brushwood Building a loft for the pig-pen, gathering-in straw Cleaning rabbit-hutches, chopping chaff, gathering alfalfa, shearing sheep, calving	Grazing Repairing the pig-pen, cleaning pig-pen, inoculating pigs, washing down cattle
With crops	Sowing: barley, oat, transportation of manure, harrowing fertilising, spreading manure, ploughing down	Weeding	Spreading manure, ploughing, Sowing millet
Feed	Sowing: turnip, alfalfa, clover	Thinning out turnip, mowing alfalfa, gathering harrowing	Mowing fodder, turning, gathering
Vineyard	Opening, pruning turning	Carving vinehoeing	Cording
Corn	Sowing		
Other plants	Sowing of poppy, potato	Harrowing of soy, hoeing of potatoes	Hilling of potatoes
Garden	Hoeing	Sowing: onion vegetables, cucumber, pumpkin, peas Planting: paprika tomato	Horse-hoeing weeding
Others	Ploughing	Ploughing transportation of gravel	Fair

	July	August	September
Around the house	Repairing cart Transportation: clay, sand, stone Repairing tools and boots, sharpening the scythe, cementing and whitewashing the stable, cleaning the pig-pen, repairing the plough	Cleaning the ladder the attic repairing the cart	Repairing the side of the cart, transportation of clay, cementing
With animals	Transportation of straw, cleaning of brushwood	Cleaning the cattle	Granzing chopping straw, transportation of shaff
Cereals	Sowing of millet Harvesting: rye, oat, wheat	Harvesting: wheat Gathering-in barley, wheat	Mowing millet Transportation of manure
Feed	Mowing: alfalfa, hay bird's-foot trefoil	Gathering transportation	Mowing bird's foot trefoil, gathering-in mowing a second time, gathering-in clover, transportation
Vineyard	Hoeing	Hoeing	Hoeing Harvesting
Corn	Horse-hoeing de-budding		Corn snapping gathering, husking cutting the stems gathering-in the stems
Hemp		Rotting-up hemp swingling	Hemp dressing
Other plants			Mowing of soy, gathering and gathering-in of soy

**Appendix No. 2. Some characteristics of the time spent on work  
on the farm of Sándor Nagy in 1944.**

Characteristic	April	May	June	July	August	Sept.
1. Work days	22	25	24	26	25	24
2. Work hours	249	275	251	315	391	278
3. Average number persons recorded	2.05	2.45	2.86	2.872	2.78	2.37
4. Total work hours	511	676	719	906	1089	661
5. Total work hours/day	24.33	27.04	29.95	34.84	43.56	27.54
6. Work hours/day	11.31	11.00	10.45	12.11	15.64	11.58
7. Total work hours paid to others	15	—	14	31	112	12
8. %	2.99	—	1.94	3.42	10.28	1.81
9. No. of hours worked for others	107	29	19	39	235	80
10. %	20.9	4.3	2.6	4.3	21.6	12.1
11. Work hours on own farm	404	647	700	867	854	581
12. %	79	96	97	96	78	88
13. No. of work hours by family members on the farm	389	647	686	836	742	569
14. Work days with draught animals	19	15	10	13	18	17
15. No. of man work hours with draught animals	412	128	169	192	569	246
16. No. of work hours with draught animals done for others	107	17	13	39	235	41
17. No. of work hours with draught animals on own farm	305	111	156	153	334	205
18. Total work hours/day with draught animals	21.7	8.5	16.9	14.8	31.7	14.5
19. Total no. of work hours / cadastral acre	27.6	36.5	38.9	49.0	58.9	35.7
20. No. of work hours per cadastral acre in own farm	21.8	35.0	37.8	46.9	46.2	31.4
21. No. of work hours per cadastral acre with draught animals	16.5	6	8.4	8.3	18	11.1

**Appendix No. 3. Composition of operations done with draught animals  
in 1944 on the farm of Sándor Nagy in 1944 in hours and in %**

	April	May	June	July	August	Sept	Total
Ploughing	60	12	15	23	90	18	218
%	14.6	9.4	8.9	12.0	15.8	7.3	12.7
Sowing	157	—	4	8	—	—	16.9
%	38.1	—	2.4	4.2	—	—	9.8
Hoeing	6	—	41	10	—	14	71
%	1.5	—	24.3	5.2	—	5.7	4.1
Transportation of manure	138	—	49	50	—	64	301
%	33.5	—	29.0	26.0	—	26.0	17.5
Gathering-in of crops	8	67	40	71	479	93	758
%	1.9	52.3	23.7	37.0	84.2	37.8	44.2
Transportation	12	20	20	30	—	26	108
%	2.9	15.6	11.8	15.6	—	10.6	6.3
Harrowing, rolling	31	21	—	—	—	21	73
%	7.5	16.4	—	—	—	8.5	4.3
Other works done with draught animals	—	8	—	—	—	10	18
%	—	6.5	—	—	—	4.1	1.0
Total	412	128	169	192	569	246	1716

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